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Protect Your Grape

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Simply falling off of a bicycle at slow speeds can cause a serious injury to the head if a helmet is not worn.

By Lt. Joseph Cahill, neurologist, Naval Hospital Pensacola

Working as a neurologist has its challenges, but I have found that sometimes the real challenge lies at home with my own children and their attitudes towards protecting their brains or “grapes” as I like to call them. As my children have grown older, it has become harder to convince them of the importance of wearing helmets when biking, skate boarding or doing other activities that can lead to head injuries. The brain is a fascinating organ when it is working at its full capacity. However, just a small injury to the brain can change a person’s interaction and behaviors and make them almost unrecognizable. An injury to the prefrontal cortex, the motor planning center, can make a lifelong musician forget how to play piano. More devastating injuries, like those that occur in head trauma, can cause a disability in patients to the extent that they may no longer be able to care for themselves independently. I have found it is often difficult to translate this medical-speak into teenager-speak. Regardless of the “worst case scenarios” that parents can paint, or the examples that can be presented, teenagers often ignore the cautions of their own parents. This even occurs at my own home despite my level of education and experience. It becomes a struggle, even for a neurologist, to enforce helmets to teenage boys trying to fit in with their skateboarding buddies or girls not wanting to mess up their hair with a helmet while riding a bike with their friends. Like many parents, I was reluctant to wear a helmet as well growing up. It was a different time when helmet safety was not promoted like it is today, and it was before I saw firsthand the devastating head injuries that occur with just a simple fall from a bicycle or skateboard. It doesn’t take a lot of force to cause an injury to the brain. Simply falling off of a bicycle at slow speeds can cause a serious injury to the head if a helmet is not worn. As parents grow older and get more experience, we begin to realize the nature of the business of being alive and how fortunate many of us are to have survived our own youth, especially those of us in the medical field. As a neurologist, I understand more than anyone the devastating consequences of children and adults not wearing helmets while snowboarding, skateboarding, bicycling or riding a motorcycle. I am proud to say I bought my first real bike helmet while in neurology residency. I was resistant at first to riding with a helmet, but I couldn’t expect my children to ride with a helmet when their neurologist dad didn’t wear one. I could enforce them wearing a helmet when they were young, but not when they turned into irascible and often antagonistic teenagers. I’ll be the first to admit I can’t protect my children from everything, but at a minimum, I can provide a good role model for them and hope that something sticks. As parents, let’s set a good example and educate our children at an early age on the importance of wearing a helmet. Please ensure as well that the helmet fits properly and that it is worn correctly. A helmet with the strap not connected won’t help during a fall. We may only have one chance to protect our “grape” or our children’s’ “grapes.” For more information on NHP, please visit

www.med.navy.mil/sites/pcola/Pages/home.aspx or <https://www.facebook.com/NavalHospPensacola> .

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